

Principal Sabbatical Report

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Nature of Sabbatical Study.

To research how principal clusters can work more effectively together to better support new leadership, reduce workload by minimising 'leadership repetition' in schools, and maximise individual strengths of school leaders across schools, to positively impact other schools in their cluster.

Rationale and Background information

Since the introduction of Tomorrows' Schools in 1989, the diversity within New Zealand schools has continued to grow. In the early days this was evident by schools independently developing numerous unique policy and procedure documents, and in more recent times this was notable by schools designing individual curricular based on their own interpretation of the New Zealand Curriculum. This has led to the creation of diverse schools across our country. However despite this diversity, there are often similar tasks and challenges facing school leaders, much of which seems to be tackled at an individual school level.

At the time of writing this sabbatical report I would have been a primary school principal for about six years. In this time I have become increasingly aware that the cyclical nature of the school year is similar in all schools, and also that many of the issues facing schools are often comparable. In my experience I have often found that when I am about to review a particular area within my own school, several other local principals are looking to do the same, or other schools in our area may have recently reviewed their own practice in the same area, having gained some level of expertise and experience along the way.

I thoroughly enjoy being a primary school principal and think that it is a very rewarding job. However for the past couple of years there has been something that has been bothering me. I think the potential of what the principals' job can be, and the reality in most cases of what it actually entails, are quite different. My concerns in this area focus primarily in two areas, both of which are related. Firstly, I believe many principals spend a lot of time completing tasks that their colleagues locally are also doing, without considering ways in which to share the load. I refer to this as leadership repetition. Secondly, as principals we are meant to be the 'master of all trades', having a sound knowledge of everything from finance, employment contracts, information technology, swimming pool resurfacing, and of course education to name a few. In reality, most principals are not experts in all of these areas (well, hopefully education). The Kiwi 'can do' attitude sees many principals undertaking a range of tasks in which they are not fully equipped for. This begs the question, why don't principals better utilise the strengths and skills of other principals in their local area in order to improve the quality of their own school?

In working with various principals at a local level it became apparent that there are a range of professional skills, strengths and interests which are possessed by those around me. These areas of expertise were benefiting the individual schools where these principals worked, however there was almost no positive flow-on effect into the other schools in our area.

A couple of years ago I was elected as chairperson of our local principal association and was keen to find out ways in which I could continue to support and develop this group. Eventually this led me to applying for a sabbatical in order to investigate the work of collaborative principal clusters around New Zealand.

A Change of Plan...

When I started my sabbatical I was keen to find answers to my two for mentioned questions and share the examples of exemplary practice with other principals in my own association and across the country. Unfortunately I never really found what I was looking for and the answers still remain somewhat elusive. I'm not saying that principals don't work together, or at times look to share tasks which will help to reduce workloads. But what I am saying is that at the principal association level, there seems to be very little planned and proactive thought given to how leadership repetition can be avoided and how the strengths of individual members can be maximised to greater benefit many schools. Obviously I didn't speak with members of every principal association throughout the country, but I did cast my net far and wide when undertaking my research. If in fact there are examples of principal associations who are working in highly collaborative ways and are modelling some of the practices in which I was hoping to discover, then please contact me as I would very much like to hear about, and learn about how your association functions.

Seeing as how I was unable to shed a lot of light into the two specific areas of my research, I have instead turned my findings into more of a guide for principal associations to use in order to identify a few next steps which may help to make their group work more cohesively and collaboratively together.

Findings

In conducting my research, I primarily used phone interviews as a key means of gathering the data that I required. I usually contacted the chairperson responsible for a particular Principal Association and asked them a range of questions regarding the schools and principals in their cluster. I asked the following questions:

1. Name of Cluster
2. The number and type of schools within their Cluster
3. Decile Range within Cluster
4. Does your cluster receive any funding? If so, what sort? Subs?
5. How does your cluster currently operate? Meetings, events, professional development etc.
6. What make the cluster work well?
7. Barriers to the cluster working well?
8. Are there elements of competition between schools within their cluster?
9. Is work shared in the cluster? How?
10. Are there examples of school leaders doing 'hands on' work in other schools in their cluster?
11. How is new leadership supported?
12. Are there other clusters or initiatives operating? EHSAS, Ariki Project, Schooling improvement initiatives etc.
13. Can you recommend anyone else I should be talking to in regards to my study?

Key Messages that emerged from the interviews:

As you read through my findings you will notice that I often use the term 'effective' cluster or association. The use of the term 'effective' is highly subjective, particularly when you consider that I didn't visit many of the associations that I used as the basis for my research. Neither did I attempt to look at the student achievement data from particular associations' schools to see whether their 'effectiveness' translated to higher student achievement rates than potentially 'less effective' associations' schools. In most cases I interviewed the association chairperson or president over the telephone. So when I use the term 'effective' or even 'collaborative' or 'cohesive' I am relying on the comments made from those principals which I interviewed. Typically we discussed elements such as commitment, positive relationships, openness, sharing, accountability and quality outcomes all being present in order to suggest an 'effective' or 'collaborative' cluster.

- Having diverse schools within an association often attributes to the capabilities of a cluster. Many of the principals that I interviewed said that having schools in their cluster with a range of deciles, gave them a wider understanding of particular issues across education. Principal associations that included schools from across the sector (primary, intermediate and secondary) found a similar thing, as members were able to offer a different perspective when working together. Some principals mentioned that cross-sector participation within a cluster enabled schools to implement programmes which may continue to support students as they transition between primary and into the secondary education system. A hunch that I came to about having diverse schools within a cluster is that this may help to reduce elements of competition between schools. Not surprisingly, high levels of competition between schools can be a barrier to principals working openly and collaboratively with one another.
- Many of the principals that I interviewed mentioned that the number of members in their association was a factor in either promoting or hampering collaboration. In most cases the larger associations tended to find it challenging to working at an in-depth and meaningful level with one another, therefore tending to have smaller sub groups or professional learning groups operating within their association. In other cases some principal associations felt they were too small and would benefit from greater membership, thus offering a wider perspective and greater ideas.
- The receiving of significant funds can be a contributing factor in helping to further develop collaboration within a cluster. Often funding is used in the area of cluster-wide professional development initiatives, with release time for teachers and principals. This approach of multiple schools working together often promoted positive relationships between principals and teachers, usually within an environment of high trust and accountability for outcomes (this was often an expectation in receiving the funding). An alternative view from one principal that I interviewed, was that she felt that external cluster funding meant that some principals were extrinsically motivated more by the funding than the desired outcome of the initiative. She went on to say that sometimes having some 'skin in

the game' and schools making a contribution towards their cluster or association saw increased buy-in.

- A significant factor in establishing a cohesive and collaborative cluster was the amount of times that principals within the cluster got together. All of the highly effective clusters that I spoke to, mentioned that their members got together at least once a term in a formal setting, and usually at least as often in a more informal get-together such as a breakfast catch up. Several of the clusters had planning groups which were responsible for organising the meetings and arranging the professional development for their cluster. Some of the principals I interviewed mentioned that there were often requests from outside organisations and individuals who were keen to present to their clusters, with the intention of solely promoting their own agendas. These principals commented that there was a need to 'gate keep' their meetings and protect their agendas to allow them to focus on educational issues.
- A few of the principals that I interviewed commented that high levels of competition between schools to attract students significantly hindered relationships between principals within their association. My findings would suggest that although competition between schools in New Zealand is relatively low, there are areas where it is more predominant, or factors such as falling roll numbers which potentially increases schools' motivation to compete for student numbers. Usually in cases of high competition principals were unwilling to open and honestly share information about their schools. They didn't want to share the positives for fear that their good ideas may be adopted by competitive schools, or the negatives in case these were used as ammunition against their school. In my own principal association where levels of competition between schools is relatively low, we have agreed on an informal stance to not advertise our schools. Advertising is expensive, not to mention the time requirements associated with putting together an effective campaign. The principals in our association agree that advertising doesn't create any more students, it may only influence which school children go to. If a school up the road committes significant funds to advertising, we may be encouraged to do the same. The only real benefactor is the local newspaper and the like.
- I was interested in finding out if and how associations supported new leadership (essentially first time principals) within their cluster. In most cases there was some level of support for new principals, however this was often more reactive in nature, without any sort of formal process being in place. The majority of principals I interviewed mentioned that in most cases a new principal would receive a few phone calls from other principals in their area to see how they were getting on. In a few cases there were informal 'buddy' type relationships operating between a new and an experienced principal, and in one association they had a more formal mentoring system in place. One association chairperson mentioned that they had started to develop a 'skills register' within their cluster whereby principals had identified areas of professional strength which they had and were willing to share with others. The chairperson of this particular association acknowledged that although it had good potential, it also had several pitfalls. In many cases principals were unwilling to put their hand up and identify themselves as experts, or other principals who viewed themselves as being experts in all areas. There were also plans to extend this 'skills register' to teachers with their cluster, although the chairperson acknowledged that teachers would most likely be even less likely to

want to be identified as experts. In reality, any form of 'skill register' or not, principals who work closely with one another start to gauge the strengths and skills of their colleagues. I firmly believe that it is not the identification of skills possessed by our colleagues which is the issue, as much as our ability to utilise these skills in ways to benefit multiple schools.

- The way in which work is shared amongst principals in effective associations was really one of the key questions I set out to investigate. Of key interest was ways in which workloads of principals could be lessened by the increased utilisation of the skills of others. As I mentioned in the introduction to this sabbatical report, I was largely disappointed by what I found. Without doubt New Zealand principals and teachers are very willing to share ideas and resources with their peers. Every principal association chairperson that I interviewed mentioned things such as policies, templates, reviews, annual and strategic plans, data, and curriculum resources to name a few, being shared both within their principal association and beyond. I know from my own experience that you can contact almost any school in the country if you are seeking particular information and not only will you almost always receive what you have requested, but the offer to come and visit is often extended as well. On the whole, New Zealand educators like to share what they are doing well and are pleased when they believe their expertise may benefit students other than those in their own school. All this being said, there is a significant difference between sharing a document with a colleague and actually proactively working on tasks in a collaborative manner which may help to both reduce the individual time principals spend on a task, as well as increasing the quality of the outcomes being sought. Instead, much of what is shared is more reactive, or when principals do work collaboratively together it is in response to issues which they perceive to be detrimental to education. We have seen examples like this in the collective response from various principal associations around the country in regards to the Government's plans to increase student numbers in classrooms. I am certainly not saying that principals shouldn't get together on issues such as these to work collaboratively towards a solution. In fact the ability to 'mobilise the troops' so quickly and effectively was surely a factor which led to a reversal in the particular case of class sizes (not to discount the pressure from parents as well). It just seems ironic to me that as principals we can work collaboratively together on some of these negative issues, whilst we rarely capitalise on the proactive opportunities which we can anticipate occurring. I haven't found examples (I'm not saying it isn't occurring) where principals from an association get together at the start of the year to share their annual plans, looking for examples where schools may be wanting to achieve similar goals and work out ways in which they may be able to better support each other. Furthermore this level of proactive sharing would allow principals who had recently completed various tasks, reviews or initiatives to share their knowledge, skills and findings with their colleagues who were about to begin a similar journey. There are many other events which occur in schools at similar times throughout the year which are largely completed by principals on an individual basis. This includes things such as developing job descriptions and setting performance goals, establishing professional development programmes, undertaking reviews, managing end of cycle bank staffing, developing budgets, and start and end of year target setting. Surely principals getting together to share how they do some of these tasks will support those with less skills, as well as exposing all involved to alternative ways of doing things.

- Primarily my sabbatical investigation focussed on principal associations and how they worked (or in some cases didn't work) together. In many areas however, it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness or collaborative nature of a principal association as there are often other groups or clusters operating across all or part of a particular principal association. Many of the principals I interviewed spoke about how most or all of the principals in their association were also part of a schooling improvement initiative, ICT cluster or were part of an EHSAS (Extending High Standards Across Schools) cluster. Many of the principals that I interviewed also mentioned being part of a principal Professional Learning Group (PLG). Some of these PLGs were facilitated by paid consultants and others had no external support. Some of the PLGs were made up of an entire principal association, while others were made of principals from different areas, but with some common needs and interests. The effects that these 'other' clusters and groups had on various principal associations were very intriguing. Typically, if all members of a particular principal association were involved together in another initiative (such as a schooling improvement or a cluster-wide professional development initiative) it tended to further galvanise the work and relationships within a cluster. In the cases where only some members of a principal association were part of another particular initiative, it tended to do either of two things. In some cases the local principal association may have been strengthened by having several of its members becoming up-skilled in a particular area which was then shared across the association. Whereas in other cases having principals involved in other groups and initiatives aside from their local principal association, led to a real fragmentation within their principal association. Some principals simply didn't have the time to commit to both groups and in other cases, the learning, development and support was so effective in their 'other' cluster, that they felt less inclined to seek this support within their own principal association. There were also cases where some principals were left out of initiatives that they would have been interested in belonging to.

Closing Thoughts

When I asked what made for an effective and collaborative principal association I always received the same answer, which not surprisingly was the relationship between members. Likewise in dysfunctional or less effective associations, it was relationships (or lack of) which were largely to blame. All principals have networks in which they participate in. As I have mentioned already, some of these may be schooling improvement clusters, specific professional development clusters, professional learning groups or something similar. Often with these types of cluster there is a shared need or comparable focus. Frequently the membership within these clusters occurs not by chance, but is established by both needs and on the back of a positive relationship between principals, and not always in that particular order. On the other hand, principal associations are established on nothing more than geography, and in some rural areas, a significant amount of geography separating 'local' schools. To suggest that needs would be similar simply due to location would in most cases be foolish, as usually there is a big variance in size, decile, and ethnic profile of neighbouring schools, not to mention numerous other factors. So in reality principal associations are made up of a diverse group of schools, with different needs and challenges, being led by principals who may not necessarily have positive relationships with one another and share little more than a postcode with their colleagues. Because of these reasons there is a possibility that a principal cluster may not function particularly well or in

some instances actually get together and exist at all. However cases of dysfunctional associations are more the exception than the rule. The reality being that regardless of size, type of school, possible religious faith, decile, ethnic make-up or any other factor, schools have a lot in common. I started this report by stating that since the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools the diversity within schools has continued to increase. While I do believe that this is the case, we seemed to have largely overlooked for the past 20 or so years just how similar school actually are. Educators talk at lengths about the specifics of their own unique context, however this doesn't alter any of the fundamental principles of effective learning and teaching. Take for example the importance of a teacher knowing their students and their past experiences. Children from a high decile inner-city school will likely have hugely different experiences from children who attend a low decile rural school. Regardless of the schooling context, there is a fundamental need in both instances for teachers to understand the past experiences of the students that they teach.

Finally I reflect back on the learning that I have experienced since commencing my sabbatical studies. As I mentioned at the start of this report, proactive collaboration within principal clusters, particularly where workloads are shared and outcomes are enhanced, seem to be elusive. Therefore in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, who said 'Be the change you wish to see in the world' perhaps it needs to start with me. I intend that my next steps need to be supporting my local principal association to continue adopting more collaborate approaches.